

In Memoriam: Warren Sonbert A Tribute to His Life and Work

Thursday, June 22, 1995, Center for the Arts

It's in time that the structure of Sonbert's "looking at things" begins to appear. It's through time that the structure begins to work on our body, mind, blood, heart, lungs. And then I walk the streets happy, smog or no smog. A good movie, good art cleans out the smog of our minds. All the talk today against art is nothing but a social smog and I don't want any part of it. You can liberate your pot, if you wish; I get high on music; or on the clear, unpretentious films of Warren Sonbert; or by looking at a brown leaf falling from a tree.

—Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal*, 11/19/70

On May 31, 1995 Warren Sonbert died from complications due to AIDS, tragically cutting short the life and work of one of the Bay Area's most widely celebrated independent film artists and film advocates. This evening the San Francisco Cinematheque pays tribute to Warren Sonbert with a screening of three of his rarely shown early films and a reception in honor of his memory.

For almost three decades, Warren Sonbert has been celebrated as one of the most innovative and prolific filmmakers of independent cinema. The subject of several Whitney retrospectives, a lauded educator and a recipient of countless festival awards both in the United States and abroad, Warren Sonbert has fixed his permanent place in the history of cinema side by side with all the other great works of film art. Together with such artists as Jonas Mekas, Andrew Noren and Stan Brakhage, Sonbert began his career in the mid-sixties, with films that reflected the social and cultural lifestyle that accompanied the artistic breakthroughs of the time. He crafted films that look at the world with a sensitive, reflexive eye; films that gaze without flinching both at his own daily life and that of his friends, acquaintances and those who casually pass before his camera's lens. Throughout the seventies and early eighties, Sonbert continued to explore this new visual language and helped forge new relationships between place and time through the properties of the film medium. Sonbert's ever broadening interpretive vision and reflexive discourse of the diary has helped to both transform and disrupt our conditioned viewing patterns, creating an emotional urgency and a need to continually question the relationship of image and perception, sight and cognition. "As viewers we are carried silently around Sonbert's country and world, yet the recorded film image transcends the specificity of a moment in time and becomes part of an aesthetic whole, an interpretation and rendering of our world." (J.G. Hanhardt)

Introductory Remarks:

Steve Anker, Director, San Francisco Cinematheque
Carla Harryman, Poet and Playwright
Danny Mangin, Critic and Film Historian

Hall Of Mirrors (1966); 16mm, color, sound, 7 minutes

Made when Sonbert was in his teens, *Hall of Mirrors* stems from the filmmaker's early experiences and involvement within the "Warhol scene". A documentary exploration of Warhol's famous mirrored room at the original factory, this work utilizes crude, underexposed, hand-held portraiture shots of two Warhol "superstars" and rivals them with various outtakes from a 1948 Hollywood melodrama.

"In the causal juxtaposition of three distinct sequences Sonbert nails the psychological and historical connection between the solipsistic narcissism of his own generation and the hysteria and despair of its

parents at their dawning recognition of the trap of the nuclear family. The underpinnings of Sonbert's vocabulary as a filmmaker are all here. Combining dated with contemporary footage reflects his sense of film as a historic artifact. ... The hall of mirrors suggests the regression of time —how the immediacy of the recording process is distanced first by editing and subsequently through successively removed screenings so that today Hall of Mirrors is all of a piece, both prophecy and ancient history."

—Amy Taubin, *Village Voice*, 1/27/87

Truth Serum (1967); 16mm, color, sound, 10 minutes

Another film from the beginning of his career, *Truth Serum* is in Warren's words "an early teenage weekend film. ... From the rock and roll period: 50's girl groups and 'the High & Mighty' theme". (WS)

Carriage Trade (1971); 16mm, color, silent, 61 minutes

Often cited as one of the most original and beautiful films of the avant-garde, *Carriage Trade* is arranged musically with brilliantly framed compositions and swirling camera movements creating a visual symphony of Sonbert's travels and experiences. In a startling juxtaposition of familiar and exotic imagery, Sonbert compares the surfaces of his images and is able to establish a basic sympathy between them. His emphasis on color, light, texture and movement brings these images together and transcends their diary content, resulting in a uniquely cinematic form.

"A 16mm 60 minute six year compilation of travels, home movies, and documents shown silent. Not strictly involved with plot or morality but rather the language of film as regards time, composition, cutting, light, distance, tension of backgrounds to foregrounds, what you see and what you don't, a jigsaw puzzle of post cards to produce varied displaced effects. Contrapuntal textures in using eight or so different stocks of film - color and b&w, negative and dyed shots. Film as music without music, each shot a cluster of notes striking a reaction in the viewer. Editing does not qualify positions of good or bad; it's all just there. Although there is both a flow and a contrast between shots, an image may not directly refer to the shot that has preceded it but rather perhaps to several shots before. Film takes in the changing relations of the movements of objects, the gestures of figures, familiar worldwide icons, rituals and reactions, rhythm, spacing and density of images. All to pull the carpet out from under you." (WS)

A Warren Sonbert Filmography

Amphetamine (1966); 16mm, b&w, sound, 10 min.
Where Did Our Love Go? (1966); 16mm, color, sound, 15 min.
Hall Of Mirrors (1966); 16mm, color, sound, 7 min.
The Tenth Legion (1967); 16mm, color, sound, 30 min.
Truth Serum (1967); 16mm, color, sound, 10 min.
The Bad and the Beautiful (1967); 16mm, color, sound, 35 min.
Connection (1967); 16mm, color, sound, 15 min.
Ted & Jessica (1967); 16mm, color, sound, 7 min.
Holiday (1968); 16mm, color, sound, 15 min.
Carriage Trade (1971); 16mm, b&w, color, silent, 61 min.
Rude Awakening (1975); 16mm, color, silent, 36 min.
Divided Loyalties (1978); 16mm, color, silent, 22 min.
Noblesse Oblige (1981); 16mm, color, silent, 25 min.
A Woman's Touch (1983); 16mm, color, silent, 22 min.
The Cup and the Lip (1986); 16mm, color, silent, 20 min.
Honor and Obey (1988); 16mm, color, silent, 21 min.
Friendly Witness (1989); 16mm, color, silent, 32 min.
Short Fuse (1991); 16mm, color, sound, 37 min.